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THE WORK OF PETER KRASNOW

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### INTRODUCTION

It is fitting that we celebrate Peter Krasnow's art in Los Angeles, where he has worked for over fifty years, and at the Skirball Museum, since his imagery, in its diverse manifestations, has frequently been animated by his sense of being a Jew: He has found pictorial sources in shtetl Russia, in the bible and folklore. His imagination has been sparked by Jewish symbols and Hebraic letters, and also by a certain joyousness, openness, and constraint which is also part of the Jewish experience.

In the over sixty years of his creative output, Peter Krasnow has produced painting, sculpture, prints, and drawings informed by a host of aesthetic, historical, and social concerns. The scope of his work -- only a small portion of which can be shown here today -- testifies to the persevering strength of his creative impulse, his rich poetic imagination, and the breadth of his original vision.

It has been my good luck, and that of my husband, to know Peter and Rose Krasnow for several years, and I am greatly honored to be able to talk about his work today. But Peter and Rose Krasnow have been known much longer to many of you; indeed, it seems that much of the world has found itself to their house on Perlita, a peaceful, vital, comforting center for art and talk.

Peter Krasnow was born in the Ukraine in 1887. His autobiography, which soon should be published, retraces his life and is frequently the source for what I have to say today. He describes movingly his family, life in his town, his first realization of what it might be to be an artist -- the great difficulty for a Jew to become a painter of images and -- at that -- to be accepted in a Russian art school -- and his work as a very young man as a sign and house painter. The abortive 1905 Russian Revolution sparked a wave of pogroms with more than 92,000 Russian Jews arriving in the United States that year and over 125,000 the following year. Peter Krasnow arrived in 1907 in Boston and two years later moved to Chicago. There he worked for several more years before he was able to afford to go to the Chicago Art Institute. To earn extra money he gave art lessons through a social agency and met the extraordinary Rose Bloom, who was to become his life-long companion and steadfast helpmate. She was from the start and at critical junctures, according to his testimony, to encourage him and even to take him with great strength of spirit, in hand. After art school Peter went to New York to try his artistic fortune. Rose followed in 1920 and they were married. A number of paintings date from this period, depictions of the bustling lower East Side of New York, markets, the Hudson River (1919). They have aptly been described as relating to the Ashcan school of New York scene painting, but here with a Jewish flavor, views of ghettoized quarters. Peter worked already with a sense of the impossible task confronting a painter: being at once true to the three-dimensional world of illusion of depth and also the two-dimensional pictorial world demanded by a flat canvas or panel. This task had been strongly enunciated by Paul Cezanne, whom Krasnow

admired. Krasnow's Gunner Road of about 1922, uses a composition similar to that used by Cézanne in Turn of the Road in the late 1880s (BMFA) and similarly indicates his working on the same pictorial problem.

Krasnow began to be recognized and in 1922 was accorded an exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club in New York. But he was also beginning to be wary of the terrible game of recognition, marketing, fame for the artist, its parasitical nature, and the possibility of "selling out." He did not want to court success. As he was to do repeatedly, he escaped the threatening engulfment of the situation: inspired by a California license plate on a passing car, he decided, in 1922, to go West.

But Rose and Peter were not to take the train, Peter did not want merely to see the United States, but to know it. So Rose and Peter set out in 1922 to cross America by car, a transcontinental interlude, as he put it, recorded in a number of fine, witty pen and ink drawings. The often precarious route and untoward adventures are suggested by the very compositions of the drawings that provide, as in Chinese paintings, something of a tilted or even a bird's eye view of the terrain with the small figures setting forth on it. The road often is central, wangling up and back through the drawings. Figures are dwarfed as a whole bustling scene or curious landscape is displayed. The fine attention to certain details and the willful awkwardness lend a flavor of innocence and wit to the scenes. The Krasnows set out from New Jersey. They had a car accident in Tuscarora, Pennsylvania, when their brakes gave way on a descent. It was unusual to drive cross-country in the 20s, as Peter has noted, "The other side of the Mississippi was an adventure. Automobile companies gave prizes for driving across." (p. 231). Nonetheless, the Krasnows continued their journey:

through Iowa (where they saw gypsies), camping at one of the first American campgrounds, in Colorado, to California.

Soon after coming to California the Krasnows met the Edward Westons through whom they acquired land -- on which Peter built their home -- that housed also his studio. It is the house in which they still live today. On the basis of Peter's Whitney exhibition in New York (and not a little through the scouting around of Rose) Peter had an important exhibition in 1922 at the Los Angeles County Museum through which he met a number of people and subsequently received a number of portrait commissions. One of them was for a Dr. Visotsky and this sober work -- for which there is also this pencil study -- suggests the modesty and melancholy of the man, drawn in upon himself. Exhibited simply as Portrait of a Man, because of the subject's wishes, the figure was called Christ-like. Among Peter Krasnow's most remarkable portraits, I think, is that of Edward Weston, now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, but currently on exhibition here. Weston looms up in the foreground, forcefully dominating the landscape. He is a narrow, strong figure blocked in in inventive shapes of nonetheless absolute certainty. The rich contrasting color areas and the overall architectonic structure indicate mastery of the two-dimensionality of the pictorial surface with clear, strong colors and novel forms as an embellishment to it.

But in the 1920s Peter also turned to religious figures as subjects for his paintings. Job and Amos also dominate the paintings of which they are the subjects, as self-contained, grave, hieratic figures. Subsidiary figures are presented, as they are in much so-called "Primitive" art at disparate scale, as smaller figures, their size determined by their status

within the narrative more than on an attempt to suggest their relative place in space. The contained, faceted and zoned background shapes interlock with and are complementary to the form and tone of the figural shapes so the whole composition of figure and situation are integrated into a striking whole. A little later I shall say more of the style of these works and others of the later 1920s.

Among the most interesting works of the late 1920s are Peter Krasnow's series of portrait studies -- including oils, pastels, and a lithograph of the fascinating Sadakichi Hartmann, half German, half Japanese, poet, playwright of symbolist dramas, erstwhile and insightful art and photographic critic, a one-time dashing and charismatic figure, friend to Whitman and Stieglitz, who was to end his days as a movie extra whose tales of former successes were to be disbelieved. Sadakichi's reputation is only now being drastically revised. In several works Krasnow has shown him reading to two sick women whom, he had decided, he could thus revivify. His dramatic face is made even more expressive through manipulations of forms to show his painful concentration and the green yellow colors. The amazement too of the women is emphasized.

In this lithograph of Sadakichi Hartmann, Sadakichi dominates the composition, much as the figure of Amos dominated the paintings of 1927. He is depicted as an unlikely, gawky figure, crazily posed, limbs awkwardly placed, suggesting the curiosity of the man who, by the late 1920s to some seemed a charlatan or a fool. Here he is shown in a floating world of little background reading Poe's The Raven, surrounded by a gathering of ancillary figures -- the Los Angeles artist-bohemian crowd of the late 1920s. George Schindler, the architect, is to the right wearing the loose, sashed

outfit he appropriated.

The Sadakichi lithograph is one of a suite of seventeen lithographs (in editions of 25) completed by Krasnow in 1928. Ten of the seventeen are exhibited at the Skirball Museum currently. Although one of the lithographs was even inspired by the film industry: On the Set -- a frenetic scene with klieg lights suggested by the making of a Josef von Sternberg film, the theme of the preponderant number of lithographs is religious in nature. As in the Sadakichi, the erratic nature of the false prophet Sabbtai Tzvi is suggested with his limbs all gangly, his physical self out of control. Nevertheless, the figure is tingling with life, and that much more curiously compelling.

Much of Krasnow's figurative work of the late '20s and early '30s the Amos the Job for example, rings of the strong stylistic vocabulary of the period, especially the Art Deco style. They are the result of a need to conform to a governing geometrical format with flattened, elongated images of a wonderful stiffness. Just as Romanesque architectural decoration of another era is subservient to the lines and planar surface of the architecture with figures that are elongated and twisted to suit a decorative sequence of geometric, abstract design, so too much of the "Art Deco" style of the late 1920s and early 1930s is comprised of figurative motifs that are similarly subservient to "decorative" needs. Meant here by "decorative" is what we would call conformity to flattened elongated, vertical shapes only slightly relieved by rounded corners.

Here in Peter Krasnow's Susanna and the Elders, for example, the central figure is all the more sensual for being restrained. Unlike the Sabbatai Tzvi, Susanna is not relaxed or casual, but hierarchial, frontal,



ceremonious, and marked by gravity. Forbidden sexuality, with the peering and pointing elders surrounding the unwittingly exposed central figure, characterizes this and several other of the lithographs. The pose of Susanna by the way -- makes voyeurs of us all. The three pious men praying to the moon in the upper right background of the lithograph of that title are a displaced counterpoint in a composition dominated by the superbly lusty foreground couple. The man is wrapped in a talus, the woman, with his tsitsis in her mouth. Again, sexuality is especially tantalizing within the context of religious stricture or the throwing off of religious constraint.

Peter Krasnow has repeatedly engaged in creating sculpture and carvings that, like his paintings, have varied considerably from period to period. Some of his earliest carvings in the 1920s such as an almost medieval looking wood and gold Madonna and Child, which I am not showing you here, were hieratic in composition. By the late 1920s, he created a series of figurative works that correspond stylistically to the geometrizing manner of a number of his paintings and lithographs. Here we might compare the heads of The Betrothal, a celebration of Jewish ritual, and Wisdom. Often, he worked with brass as in Atlantis, in which the figures of a Man, Woman, and Child are barely individuated, one from the other, and are subsumed within a given form. Soon Krasnow would be working with wood and it would behoove him then to stay within the given of the primal material, as we shall see. More naturalistic than the Atlantis is Peter's contemporaneous noble head of Rose Krasnow, simple, strong, dignified, noble, on a rustic, visibly hewn solid base.

A very successful exhibition in 1931 in San Francisco, at the

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, greeted with critical acclaim, served to suggest to Peter that the critics were over generous, that he was not the genius critics claimed. The Krasnows decided to go away for a while. When Mexico proved impossible, they went to France: to Paris and then the Dordogne. Peter has written at length of this period: the slow, but then embracing welcome of the Krasnows by the people of the village. Watercolors of the region, some of which are exhibited, drawings of a number of events and citizens, and wonderful pen and ink studies of neighbors, of a great sharp, fluidity and cursive sensitivity -- see here Mme Verlac, one of the neighbors -- were produced during the 1931 to 1934 period. Painted motifs range from circuses to fantastic figures to portraits of events of village life. I am showing you a number of the works here. But by 1934 there was unrest in Europe and intimations of war.

In 1934 Peter and Rose Krasnow returned to Los Angeles. He turned again to developing wood sculpture. Unlike the figurative sculpture of the late '20s (here is The Prophet of 1928), Peter became interested in abstract or non-objective work, considering increasingly his materials primary to his work. His first sculptures of the 1930s are totemic. Peter worked with wood. He felt it was not "aloof" from the touch as is stone and marble. He appreciated the special qualities of various woods, and came to make an increasingly massive sculpture that was organic in character. The sculptures represent work created over ten years and ten years of growing understanding of wood sculpture. He moved to tree trunk sculpture. Peter sought consonant forms to the natural forms of the wood. Some of his most extraordinary sculpture he has called the demountables, forms grooved to fit one another that may be disassembled and reformed: This was an

extraordinary idea, creating a new feeling for parts, the whole and a changing focus. Of the making itself of his wood sculpture Peter has said,

I have a strong personal dislike for power tools and have never used them. The reasons are numerous. The noise a power tool makes when the motor is working interferes with the powers of concentration and breaks harshly on the mind at a time when all the faculties should be attuned and undistracted to serve in the completion of the task begun. It is at best an unnecessary gadget which destroys the sensitive relationship between the sculpture and his material, and before long will exercise a drug-like temptation to lean upon it and make use of it too often and where it is not needed. The saving of time and labor is canceled by the impediment that it erases the natural markings and slicks up the textures, leaving a barren imprint on the material. A physical, or mechanical imprint, which cannot be reconciled with the creative aspect of the work.

During the Spanish Civil War and the beginnings of World War II, Peter produced a series of drawings indicating the world gone topsy-turvy with tortured figures under the monstrous powers of fascism and destruction.

But with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the world turned too mad to depict and indeed, in a deep sense, unrecognizable -- Peter turned once again to painting and now inward for inspiration, creating brightly colored panels of flat, abstract forms locked into symmetrical,

calmly assertive compositions. In his autobiography he writes of this period in the '40s: "now when tragedy was at the deepest point my paintings breathed joy and light -- color structures instead of battle scenes, symmetry to repair broken worlds." Here are several examples of the paintings of these years, that, under the circumstances, are testimony to the importance to Krasnow of creation even amidst global destruction. He gave new clarity to color and limpid assurance to geometrical forms. Krasnow was happy to eliminate outline, perspective, and shading, what he called "tricks" of painting -- the last two especially contribute within a picture to the illusion of the three-dimensional, outside world of reality. But the outside world of affliction and destruction is no longer suggested in Peter's works.

In his work of the 1950s, in contrast to that of the previous decade, Peter began to incorporate Jewish symbols and other symbolic images, frequently of his own invention and elusive. Jewish legend and references and biblical sources often provided his subjects. Moreover, the compositions began to pulsate. Forms were no longer truly symmetrical or at rest, locked into place, but played off against one another. New, amoebic, or jagged forms appear, sometimes in registers or within rectilinear zones, sometimes loosely looped together with laces of bright color. What might in more ordinary paintings be understood as background and foreground can be differentiated, but as in a theatrical stage, levels backwards can be perceived. Forms often seem not merely inventive but whimsical, innocent, fresh, and childlike. The small, broken shapes suggest inchoate Hebrew letters, dancing on the surface. Indeed, two decades later Peter was to include Hebraic writing in his paintings.

Two Brothers (which exists in at least two versions), is an interesting work of this period. The legend is told that after the people first returned to Jerusalem, in the place to be that of the Holy Temple, two brothers each worked surreptitiously at night to supply the other with extra sheaves of wheat that would be left in the other's field. Finally, one night they met and realized what each had done, and a voice spoke and said, as it is said in the psalm, "Behold how good and pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell Together in Unity." Here, a number of elements can be recognized in this ceremonious presentation: the sheaves of wheat, crossed arms, the juncture of the two sides of the composition, and the looped ribbon unifying the whole. Small, animated forms over all contribute to the liveliness.

Occasionally, during the 1960s, and 1970s Peter Krasnow returned to much earlier compositions which he quite literally revised -- that is resaw and repainted -- creating entirely new versions of compositions in the manner he was then developing, of brilliant colors and pulsating, flat forms. This current manner lent an air of festive gaiety and other-worldliness with its exuberant color and vibrant forms that gave autonomous life to what was depicted. Thus, Casa Verdugo, the subject of a painting soon after the Krasnows' arrival in Los Angeles in the 1920s (and now in a private collection), is here revised, literally seen again over a distance of fifty years of time and art. In his autobiography Peter describes one of his first shelters in Los Angeles:

The old adobe facing the foothills north of the city was a California landmark. The walled park, the immense tress, the exotic shrubs, cacti, and century plants daily helped to

testify that the age of this venerable relic of Spanish days was above a hundred years [old], and that its history dated [from] before the admission of California as part of the United States. The condition of the building and gardens, the sun dial and the oven of baked clay beside a waterless fountain showed in the present state that it had seen much degradation since the days when Governor Verdugo, the last, had built it as a stop-over on El Camino Real. Of all its former grandeur there remained intact only the adobe shell and the name "Casa Verdugo."

In this setting about half a dozen artists, painters and sculptors, were living in a sort of colony. Each had for privacy a small cubicle . . . The arrangement served to keep the group apart when at work yet near enough to create some sort of kinship when all met in the evening for community dinner in the main room. As the seasons created little diversity I did not suffer from missing a private studio. All outdoors was mine to use. The stimulation derived from living in an artists' colony was ample compensation for the cramped living space in my cubicle.

. . . I was not troubled by the change of light which newcomers complained of upon arrival here. I was creating color schemes independent of the changeable color and unsteady light of this semi-tropical landscape. Winter

passed by unnoticed, spring was on the calendar; the change was hardly perceptible, the garden had bloomed all winter through.

But then calamity:

On the first of May [1923], the wreckers came. They came early in the morning and we did not know what was happening until the sky began to show over our heads as we were seated at breakfast . . . The baked mud walls . . . were crumbling. An effort had been made by the artists to induce the city to preserve this old landmark, but it failed . . . a frigidaire apartment building would stand where the old fountain played and a city street would be cut through the bed chamber where a Spanish governor had slept [pp. 262-3].

A detail of Casa Verdugo, a luxuriant succulent plant painted hot pink, orange, red, in the upper left, surrounded with new forms, becomes the subject of an independent panel of a paradisiacal garden, and indicates one way in which Krasnow works -- concentrating at times in separate paintings on elements from or for others. The panel is shown interestingly in this slide against a backdrop of the unrestrained, burgeoning, colorful growth of Peter and Rose's own garden surrounding their house.

Similarly, in 1971 Peter did a new version of The Chupa which is in the current exhibition with the drawing of 1907 on which the painting is based. The traditional Jewish marriage ritual of the shtetl is now transported outside of actual place and time: each object, space, shadow,

or detail -- whether in reality a true physical presence or an insubstantial and ephemeral shadow or space -- and this differentiation and imitation of reality is clearly depicted in the early drawing -- each of these objects, shadows, spaces, is now made palpable -- given actual, pictorial substance, value, and extraordinary vitality. With all things palpable, the scene is lent a sense of miraculousness. Each element is given life so that the painting is what Peter has called -- in no hint of particular self-approbation -- godly.

Other paintings of 1971 also based on earlier sketches are From My Shtetl which depicts two figures at either side of the composition bracketing the horse drawn cart of a water carrier, and the similarly composed The Sinners, not in the exhibition, in which the space between the two figures is made even more vital and electric by the nature of the subject matter: a man confronted with the temptation of a beautiful woman who exposes herself to him and who draws back in shock. The horses here, Peter has said, represent the commotion of fright. In this theme of the tempting and sensual but forbidden woman, explored also years earlier by Peter, Jewish lore, in this instance a biblical source, once more is central: indeed, it was after the work was completed that Rose Krasnow suggested to Peter that the theme was just like that described during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt; the Jews overcame many obstacles and enemies but were greatly threatened at Peor with the seduction of some of their number by the Moabite and Midianite women (Numbers, Chapter 6).

A sensual figure is central also to another painting of the early 1970s, the voluptuous odalisque-like Abvishag, the composition of which is similar to that of Jacob's Dream, with a central recumbent Jacob (in a



private Los Angeles collection). The subject is again from the Old Testament: Kings (3:1) tells us:

Now King David was old, and advanced in years; and when he was covered with clothes, he was not warm. His servants therefore said to him: Let us seek for our lord, the king, a young virgin, and let her stand before the king, and cherish him, and sleep in his bosom, and warm our lord the king. So they sought a beautiful young woman in all the lands of Israel, and they found Abvishag a Shumanite and brought her to the king. And the damsel was exceedingly beautiful and she slept with the king, and served him, but the king did not know her.

Here, we are allowed to gaze on the full, lazing uninhibited figure of Abvishag, stretched out against a garden of succulent plants and creepers as luxuriant as herself. The tender and hothouse colors and the sensual, even erotic forms that comprise her body and the background yield an extraordinary feeling of sensuality.

The combination of recognizable images removed from the everyday context through symbolic characters, abstract shapes, and irreal colors is also used in this work of a Lion of Judah, this version an independent work, a smaller version forms part of a series that includes symbols dear to Jewish heritage.

By the 1970s Peter increasingly included letters from the Aleph-Bet, Hebraic letters in his work. The importance of writing and letters has a long history, of course, within Jewish tradition. The

letters in these late paintings are frequently vibrant with life, illumined with strong color. Frequently, letters have great and secret meanings; they are felt to have an intrinsic holiness. Peter in these last two works I shall show you today has incorporated the boldly and inventively embellished letters of his own and Rose's names: Pinchas and Rachel or Shoshana. I am very happy today to be able with you to pay them tribute and to pay tribute to Peter, a creative man.